

The Making of a Cape Cod Library

By Renee Roberts, Proprietor of Rose's Books and the Clock and Rose Press in Harwich Port

Viewing a library for the first time is like having a ticket to the invisible world of the mind of its founder. Sometimes I feel like we should have special permission to do this, since libraries provide an unwitting opening into people, revealing things that might otherwise be hidden from public view.

Even a public library, despite years of acquisitions and de-accessions and the layering of librarians unrelated to each other, each with widely divergent missions and interests, can give great insight into the thinking of its founders. If we accept that we each construct our own reality from the sensory input we receive — and if we accept that this reality is valid — then our own particular mental mix of fact, fantasy and connected knowledge generates a legitimate response to the library's collection and, in a sense, interacts with the collection itself to create a more tightly-woven reality.

Strange words, a sort of a philological mysticism, but I have to admit a strong affinity with Sturgis Library in the Town of Barnstable on Cape Cod because I've had the time to study its earliest acquisitions, some of which I've purchased as discards at the library sales that run throughout the year. Sturgis is not the largest library on Cape Cod, but it is nevertheless extraordinarily interesting despite its size, particularly for its special collections in New England genealogy, maritime affairs, and Cape Cod history, as well as an interesting smattering of nineteenth-century literature, history and philosophy which has survived more or less intact from its inception.

What I've found there of particular interest is the combination of its ambiance — it is housed in the oldest library building in the United States, originally built in 1644 for the Reverend John Lothrop — and its ineluctable “intentional nature”, the brainchild of Lothrop's direct descendant, William Sturgis, a risk-taking clipper-ship owner who prospered in the mid-nineteenth century through trading in the Far East and the Pacific Northwest.

Sturgis purchased his family homestead on the Old King's Highway and then willed it, along with \$15,000 (a small fortune in 1863) and his own books, to found a free public library. This was a singular act of personal risk in community investment, even more so given that whatever “profits” to be made would accrue beyond Sturgis's own lifetime. So for me, the heart of this library is not the main entrance-way or the main desk, but the homestead itself — the original 17th-century building, with its pumpkin-colored wide-board floors and long pine table which was related to the strength and resourcefulness of the library's founder — the center of many a gathering, as well as Reverend Lothrop's sermons... a center not just of the mind, but of the spirit. Reverend Lothrop's Bible is still resident in this room, protected within a glass-covered case.

It is interesting to me that Sturgis did not cause a new building, more appropriate for the library, to be built, as he could readily have done. Instead, this homestead was purchased intentionally *for* the library. I would like to think that the values and knowledge that Sturgis found through that place, and through his family, were willed, to the community, along with the financial resources to make the library itself happen.

When books were purchased with William Sturgis's endowment, each one was painstakingly hand-entered into a ledger, which, by number, spelled out the author, the title, the place and year of publication, the place from which the volume came (whether it was a donation or an outright purchase) and the cost. In each book, the Library placed a beautiful bookplate, hand-numbered and hand-dated. It *mattered* to the library that there be a record of when each book was purchased, and in what order.

After poking around a bit with the Library Director, Lucy Loomis, we re-discovered the earliest record of Sturgis's acquisitions — a leather-bound quarto, the spine separated from the binding, containing ruled pages filled with these inked records. What a find! Now I could surmise — or perhaps imagine — what was in the

minds of the people who were entrusted with Sturgis's small fortune and commissioned to convert commercial paper wealth into food for the imagination.

I always thought that the library began with a donation of books from the estate of William Sturgis, and it's true that he did give bequeath 1,300 books to the new collection, but these were not the first books officially received or entered into the library's acquisitions ledger.

The Sturgis Free Library's first trustees were personally selected by William Sturgis: Samuel Hooper, Lemuel Shaw, and Edward W. Hooper. Their first purchase for the library was the 8th Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. There was always a strong Anglophile thrust in the early Sturgis acquisitions, and the Britannica was (and still is) the *né plus ultra* compendium of useful information in the English language. This purchase was followed quickly by the *New American Cyclopaedia* and the *American Annual Cyclopaedia*, pale cousins of their British counterpart.

The third acquisition listed was another safe choice — a current 1865 edition of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary*. This was quickly followed by two atlases: Colton's *General Atlas*, and Black's *General Atlas*. Founded by an adventurer/entrepreneur and being on the East coast and physically sited among sea captains' houses, the Sturgis Library immediately took a stand beyond regional parochialism and reached out for knowledge about the rest of the world.

Having made basic purchases in general knowledge, geography, and linguistics, it was time to feed the mind and the spirit. The Sturgis trustees chose the *Works of William Shakespeare* as their seventh acquisition.

The 8th and 9th choices, I think, were more motivated by personal passion than as choices for the commonweal. The trustees acquired the three-volume *Naval Biographical Dictionary*, published in London, 1849, by William R. O'Byrne. This was a huge compendium of the lives of every living officer — some 5,000 or so — still serving in Her Majesty's Navy in 1845.

Purchased along with this essential British naval reference was the *American Practical Navigator* by Nathaniel Bowditch. The very rare Civil War edition of 1865 acquired by Sturgis would now be worth over \$3,000, if one could find a copy at all. Sadly only a contemporary version of the book is still owned by the Library. Sturgis, however, still has the Naval Biographical Dictionary in its maritime collection.

Librarians are always being pulled between the Scylla and Charybdis of maintaining current versions of their books (buying for information) vs. maintaining ageing volumes that might have historical content that is not of current interest, given limited shelf space. Who among the trustees would know that the 1865 Bowditch would become a desirable collectible by the year 2004?

The Library's 10th choice was a curious one: out of all the books available on the planet, the Trustees selected *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution, with An Historical Essay*, by Lorenzo Sabine. Sabine interviewed loyalists who had fled to Canada and compiled a group of fascinating and poignant sketches. One would have to wonder why this particular volume was chosen — as the tenth book in the entire library — and before the work of any American patriot.

Books 11 through 26 were, perhaps, the Trustees' first attempt to address the needs of young people, and were a return to Americana. Washington Irving's *Works* were purchased, followed by Pierre Irving's *Life and Letters of Washington Irving*, a combination biography of the author by his nephew and a collection of his letters. This book represented Sturgis Library's first selected work of literary biography.

With the next two choices, I get the feeling that the Trustees were again becoming adventurous and feeding more personal reading desires. Francis Parkman's, *Pioneers of France in the New World* was the 28th book added to the library, followed by Epes Sargent's *Arctic Adventures by Sea and Land from the Earliest Day to the Last Expedition in Search of Sir John Franklin*.

Emboldened by their purchases in Canadian and Arctic exploration, the trustees, I imagine, snuck in a now seemingly odd but probably popular selection for number 30: *The Memoir of Rev. Sydney Smith*. Smith was British, a popular preacher and moral philosopher, who openly attacked the Protestant bigotry of his day. Smith was the first, but not to prove the only, socially aware writer to be chosen for the new library.

The next choices reflect “serious” library acquisitions; I would like to imagine that one of the local ladies took these gentlemen in hand and demanded some really interesting books. The library purchased, in rapid succession, a 7-volume set of the works of Thackeray, 7 volumes of Emerson, the poetical works of Whittier, Longfellow, Tennyson and — here’s why I think a woman was behind this — book number 49, Adelaide Proctor — followed by Oliver Wendell Holmes and James Russell Lowell.

Adelaide Proctor [also Procter](1825–1864) was a social activist, poet, and contributor to Charles Dickens’s *Household Words* under the pseudonym ‘Mary Berwick’, and Dickens wrote the foreword to her collected works.

Said Dickens of her, “Always impelled by an intense conviction that her life must not be dreamed away, and that her indulgence in her favourite pursuits must be balanced by action in the real world around her, she was indefatigable in her endeavours to do some good. Naturally enthusiastic, and conscientiously impressed with a deep sense of her Christian duty to her neighbour, she devoted herself to a variety of benevolent objects. Now, it was the visitation of the sick, that had possession of her; now, it was the sheltering of the houseless; now, it was the elementary teaching of the densely ignorant; now, it was the raising up of those who had wandered and got trodden underfoot; now, it was the wider employment of her own sex in the general business of life; now, it was all these things at once. Perfectly unselfish, swift to sympathize and eager to relieve, she wrought at such designs with a flushed earnestness that disregarded season, weather, time of day or night, food, rest.” Like Rev. Smith himself, the author of the first book by a woman chosen for Sturgis Library was a woman with an expanded social point of view.

Proctor was followed by two other women authors — Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Harriet Beecher Stowe. By the 100th selection, the library trustees had expanded the library’s offerings in literature (the works of Dickens, Hawthorne, Hugo, Scott), poetry (the American reprint of *The Aldine Poets*), history (William Prescott, Froude’s *England*, Palfrey’s *New England*), exploration, and, with a nod to religion, had added Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. It was a collection remarkably free of diatribe and parochialism, a tremendous collection of works designed for open-ended reflection. It was, and remains, a precious legacy.



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This Indenture in two parts, made this twentieth day of October in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty three, by and between William Sturgis of Boston in the County of Suffolk and Commonwealth of Massachusetts, merchant, of the first part, and Samuel Hooper, Samuel Shaw and Edward W. Hooper all of Boston aforesaid, of the second part;

Witnesseth That whereas the said William Sturgis is desirous of founding a free library for the use of the inhabitants of the Town of Barnstable in the County of Barnstable and Commonwealth aforesaid, and has requested the parties of the second part to act as trustees thereof, and has by his deed of even date herewith conveyed to them certain land situated in said Barnstable, and has also transferred and paid over to them fifteen bonds of the United States of the par value of fifteen thousand dollars, to have and to hold to them and their successors, to and for the following uses and purposes, viz:

First: To collect the interest and income of said real and personal estate and, after paying the necessary expenses, add the same, or the part thereof not expended, to the principal, until they think the intention of the Grantor can best be carried into effect.

Second: That they shall at such time as they deem best apply such portion of the principal or income of said fund, or of both, as they think best to the erection upon said land of a suitable library building and to the proper finishing, furnishing and supplying the same, to repairs, enlargement or rebuilding, to the erection of fences and the laying out of the grounds, and to such other expenditures connected therewith as they may deem proper.

Third: To invest so much of the fund as is not required as aforesaid in some safe and secure manner, and to change investments from time to time as they may deem expedient, and to collect the income thereof, and therewith to pay all necessary expenses of keeping the buildings on said real estate in good repair, and of insurance and taxes (if any), also of the binding, care and preservation of the books and other property belonging to the trust fund, in the purchase from time to time of such books, maps, literary or scientific works or journals as they deem adapted to the wants of the community for whose use they are intended, and to any other expenditures they deem a proper charge upon the fund.

The said Trustees shall have full power to make and enforce such rules, regulations and by-laws for the use, preservation, management and increase of the library as they deem suitable, and to change the same from time to time; also to appoint such officers and employ such agents as they think best.

Fourth: That the said Trustees may, if they unanimously agree, associate

William Sturgis establishes the library, October 20, 1863.